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PARIS FOR WALLER; LONDON FOR TSOU

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/12/2015

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SUBJECT: THE VIEW FROM THE SYRIAN HINTERLAND

CLASSIFIED BY: CHARGE D'AFFAIRES MICHAEL CORBIN, PER 1.4 B,D.

11. (C) SUMMARY: A/DCM, ACCOMPANIED BY A/ARMA, VISITED DEIR AZOUR, NOVEMBER 13-14, MEETING TWICE WITH THE HEADS OF TWO LARGE BEDOUIN TRIBES THERE. THE TWO EXTREMELY URBANIZED SUNNI TRIBAL LEADERS WERE FOCUSED ON U.S. POLICY IN THE REGION AND ASKED REPEATEDLY ABOUT WHETHER THE US. HAD MADE OR INTENDED TO MAKE A DEAL WITH THE SYRIAN REGIME. THEY WERE SUPPORTERS OF POLITICAL REFORM IN SYRIA BUT EXPRESSED SKEPTICISM THAT THERE COULD BE PROGRESS UNDER THE BASHAR AL-ASAD REGIME. END SUMMARY.

12. (C) QUESTIONS ABOUT IRAQ AND "A DEAL": A/DCM, ACCOMPANIED BY A/ARMA, VISITED DEIR AZOUR, LOCATED IN NORTHEASTERN SYRIA ON THE BANKS OF THE EUPHRATES RIVER, NEAR THE BORDER WITH IRAQ, NOVEMBER 13-14, MEETING TWICE WITH BEDOUIN LEADERS, SHEIKH MOHAMMED AL-JALAT, HEAD OF THE LARGE BAGARRA TRIBE, AND SHEIKH EL-WANY (NFI), HEAD OF THE SOOKNA TRIBE. THE TWO MEN WERE FOCUSED ON U.S. POLICY IN THE REGION, ASKING REPEATEDLY ABOUT USG INTENTIONS FOR SYRIA, IRAQ, AND THE PALESTINIANS. BOTH WERE REASONABLY WELL-INFORMED ABOUT THE RECENTLY HELD U.S. MID-TERM ELECTIONS AND ASKED IF THE OUTCOME PRESAGED SOME KIND OF DEAL WITH SYRIA INVOLVING IRAQ, INTERNAL REFORM, AND LEBANON.

13. (C) SHEIKH MOHAMMED IN PARTICULAR EXPRESSED CONCERN THAT THE USG WOULD STOP SUPPORTING DEMOCRATIZATION AND POLITICAL REFORM IN SYRIA IN EXCHANGE FOR SARG HELP IN STABILIZING IRAQ. A/DCM MADE CLEAR THAT THERE WAS NO DEAL BETWEEN SYRIA AND THE U.S. AND THAT U.S. POLICY TOWARD SYRIA HAD NOT CHANGED. THE MEN ALSO EXPRESSED CONCERN ABOUT WHETHER THE U.S. HAD "A VISION" FOR IRAQ AND DESCRIBED U.S. POLICY IN IRAQ "A FAILED EXPERIMENT."

14. (C) PROSPECTS FOR POLITICAL REFORM: ON THE BROADER TOPIC OF THE PROSPECTS FOR POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC REFORM IN SYRIA, SHEIKH MOHAMMED EXPRESSED SKEPTICISM THAT ANY PROGRESS WAS POSSIBLE WITH THE CURRENT REGIME IN POWER. HE TERMED IT A "POLICE STATE-MUKHABBARAT" REGIME THAT HAD SUPPRESSED ANY SERIOUS PRACTICE OF POLITICAL ACTIVITY IN SYRIA FOR SOME 40 YEARS. THE RESULT WAS THAT SYRIANS LACKED EVEN RUDIMENTARY POLITICAL EXPERIENCE.

15. (C) HE AND A DEIR AZOUR ATTORNEY FRIEND, TARIK (NFI) WHO ATTENDED ONE OF THE MEETINGS, POINTED TO THE HAPLESSNESS OF THE DAMASCUS DECLARATION GROUP AS AN EXAMPLE OF THIS LACK OF POLITICAL SAVVY. THEY DESCRIBED THE DD INITIATIVE, LAUNCHED ONE YEAR AGO TO PRESS FOR DEMOCRATIZATION AND POLITICAL REFORM IN SYRIA, AS LARGELY STILL-BORN. BOTH MEN EXPRESSED VARYING DEGREES OF SUPPORT FOR -- AND RESERVATIONS ABOUT --

THE DECLARATION. SHEIKH MOHAMMED DESCRIBED IT AS OVERLY THEORETICAL AND INTELLECTUAL RATHER THAN BASED IN REAL POLITICS. HE NOTED THAT MOST SYRIANS, ESPECIALLY THOSE IN THE PROVINCES, WERE POOR, STRUGGLING TO SURVIVE ECONOMICALLY, AND MORE FOCUSED ON JOBS THAN ON POLITICAL CHANGE.

¶16. (C) CRITICIZING AMERICAN POLICY: SHEIKH MOHAMMED (AND THE OTHERS AT SUBSEQUENT POINTS IN THE CONVERSATIONS) CRITICIZED AMERICAN POLICY TOWARDS THE PALESTINIANS, TELLING EMBOFFS THAT THE U.S. WAS BIASED TOWARDS ISRAEL AND NEEDED A MORE FLEXIBLE, NUANCED POLICY. HE NOTED THAT THE U.S. SHOULD ENLIST THE SUPPORT OF SAUDI ARABIA, FOR EXAMPLE, TO HELP SUPPORT HAMAS FINANCIALLY AND WEAN THE GROUP AWAY FROM IRANIAN INFLUENCE. SHEIKH MOHAMMED ALSO MAINTAINED THAT THE U.S. SHOULD STOP INSISTING THAT HAMAS FULFILL WHAT HE TERMED "IMPOSSIBLE" POLITICAL CONDITIONS. A/DCM NOTED THAT THE QUARTET LEADERS HAD MADE CLEAR WHAT HAMAS AND THE PALESTINIANS NEEDED TO DO TO BE RECOGNIZED BY THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY.

¶17. (C) COMMENT: THE FACT THAT TWO SYRIAN SUNNI TRIBAL LEADERS WERE SO FOCUSED ON POLITICAL REFORM MAY REFLECT PREVIOUS INVOLVEMENT IN POLITICS IN DAMASCUS. SHEIKH MOHAMMED IN PARTICULAR IS POLITICALLY ALLIED WITH DAMASCUS-BASED PRO-POLITICAL REFORM BUSINESS LEADER (AND FORMER MP), A LONG-TIME EMBASSY CONTACT. WE HAVE ALSO HEARD EXPRESSIONS OF SUPPORT OCCASIONALLY FROM A FEW OTHER SIMILARLY URBANIZED TRIBAL LEADERS, ALTHOUGH IN GENERAL IT REMAINS UNCLEAR TO US HOW WIDELY SUCH ISSUES OF POLITICAL REFORM AND DEMOCRATIZATION ARE SHARED AT TRIBAL GRASS ROOTS LEVELS, BEYOND THIS ELITE CIRCLE. FOR THAT REASON IT IS ALSO UNCLEAR WHAT THESE SENTIMENTS MIGHT MEAN FOR THE ASAD REGIME AND FOR BA'ATH PARTY POLITICAL CALCULATIONS.

¶18. (C) COMMENT CONTINUED: ELEMENTS OF AT LEAST TWO DIFFERENT SECURITY SERVICES FOLLOWED EMBOFFS ALL OVER DEIR AZOUR, PICKING THEM UP AS SOON AS THEY CHECKED INTO THE HOTEL. A/DCM, WHO HAD MET SHEIKH MOHAMMED ONCE IN DAMASCUS (HE IS A FORMER MP), WARNED HIM BY PHONE THAT SYRIAN SECURITY SERVICES WERE FOLLOWING THEM CLOSELY AND WOULD BECOME AWARE OF ANY MEETING. AL-JALAT DID NOT SEEM SURPRISED OR BOTHERED BY THIS NEWS AND ASSURED A/DCM HE SHOULD PROCEED WITH THE MEETING. ELEMENTS OF THE SECURITY SERVICES WAITED OUTSIDE WHILE EMBOFFS MET AT THE SHEIKHS LARGE DEIR AZOUR HOUSE. SUBSEQUENTLY SOME OF THEM TOLD EMBOFFS THEY WERE THEMSELVES FROM THE BAGARRA TRIBE, A PIECE OF INFORMATION THE SHEIKH FOUND AMUSING WHEN INFORMED OF IT THE NEXT DAY. A WEEK AFTER THE DEIR AZOUR MEETING, THE SYRIAN MILITARY INTELLIGENCE FOREIGN LIAISON OFFICE (FLO) INFORMED DATT THAT THE SARG WAS EXTREMELY DISPLEASED THAT A/ARMA (AND A/DCM) HAD MET WITH THE SHEIKHS. HE ALSO NOTED THAT THE SARG WAS ANGRY WITH THE SHEIKHS AND HAD "ARRESTED" AT LEAST ONE OF THE SHEIKHS. A/DCM CHECKED WITH OTHER CONTACTS WHO ASSURED HIM THERE HAD BEEN NO ARRESTS.

CORBIN